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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000909

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SUBJECT: APATHY, LOW TURNOUT MARK LOCAL SYRIAN ELECTIONS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 864

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS381

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Lackluster turnout and voter apathy characterized local elections held throughout Syria on August 26, 27. This round of elections garnered even less attention than Parliamentary elections earlier this year. Voters had little choice but to rubberstamp government-approved lists of candidates dominated by the Ba,ath Party. Local media focused on inflating voter turnout and trumpeting supposed &transparency8 while encouraging Syrians to participate. The opposition Damascus Declaration publicly repeated their boycott of local elections on August 26. Yet, in isolated pockets of the country, anti-regime groups tried to present an alternative. Such candidates, however, were uniformly defeated almost everywhere. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) LOW TURNOUT AND LACK OF ENTHUSIASM: Voter turnout appeared to be even lower than for Parliamentary elections, estimated at 10-20 percent of eligible voters at most by many observers. Anecdotal observations as well as reports from journalists, civil society activists and other diplomats support this assessment. Poloff visited three polling places in Damascus. In most cases, campaign workers and plainclothes internal security agents outnumbered voters. Diplomatic and press contacts who visited voting sites also noted lackluster turnout. There were some exceptions, however. Poloff observed notable activity at a polling center in the conservative Sunni neighborhood of Kafer Soseh, a Damascus suburb. During one half-hour period roughly three dozen voters arrived, mostly in two service taxi vans that appeared to be directed to the voting center by campaign workers. Their bustle of activity appeared to be the clear exception, however.

[1](#)3. (U) OFFICIAL MEDIA TOUTS DEMOCRATIC PROCESS: Official Syria news media painted a very different picture of the elections, touting high voter turnout, the participation of women and the democratic nature of the local elections. On August 29, the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) quoted Minister of Local Administration and Environment Hilal al-Atrash as saying official turnout had reached 49.54 percent of Syria,s nearly eight million eligible voters, up nearly 12 percent from four years ago. Al-Atrash also asserted that many more women will be in the local councils reflecting women,s belief in the need for them to participate effectively in society. (Note. According to official statistics, women won a total of 319 out of 9,697 available seats, which were contested by over 30,000

candidates. End Note.)

¶4. (U) Near the close of elections on August 27, local media quoted al-Atrash describing &an atmosphere of transparency, freedom, and democracy.8 In an apparent attempt to get out the vote, state-run television broadcast election coverage on August 26 and 27 with live dispatches from polling places around the country and interviews with government officials and community leaders. One such official, journalist, author, and member of Syrian Parliament, Salim Abbud, said that Syrians should be aware of the &importance of their role in exercising their democratic right.8

¶5. (C) SOME OPPOSITION PARTICIPATE: Although the main opposition force in Syria, the Damascus Declaration, reiterated their boycott of local elections in a public statement on August 26, some other opposition groups said they participated in the elections by putting forward their own lists. A coalition of the Kurdish Future Movement, the Kurdish Yekiti Party and the Kurdish Democratic Union backed a list of independents under a new banner called &the National Alliance8 in Qamishli, al-Malikiyeh, Ras al-Ein and other Northeast cities, according to Damascus representative Hervin Osse of the Kurdish Future Movement. In a statement, the Kurdish Future Movement announced that their main aim was to demonstrate that they could participate in local elections rather than win seats. In addition, Damascus-based Yekiti lawyer Muhammad Mustafa said many Kurds came out to vote in support of the National Alliance in Qamishli. Despite the reported enthusiasm, embassy contacts in the Northeast say that the only National Alliance candidates to win were those who were unopposed by other regime-backed &independents8 in small towns or villages in the Northeast such as Khatunieh or Darbasieh.

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¶6. (C) In Sednaya there were reports that a number of former communists not aligned with the Damascus Declaration attempted to create their own mixed list which included both independents and official NPF candidates but favored the former. Yet, according to embassy contacts, security forces and Ba,ath party officials intimidated those who tried to vote for the independent-heavy list. Results clearly showed that the regime prevented opposition-backed candidates from winning.

¶7. (U) BACKGROUND: As previewed in Ref A, on August 26 and 27 local elections were held throughout Syria from the village to the governate level. Polls opened at 0700 local time on August 26 and closed at 2000. A second day of voting occurred on August 27 between 0700 and 1400. (Note. Syrian election law mandates a second day of voting if there is less than 51 percent turnout after the first day. End Note.) Unlike Parliamentary elections, voters were required to vote in their district of residence, except in Aleppo where the governor made arrangements for out-of-district voters to cast their ballots at dedicated centers around the governate. In most other respects, the structure of the local elections closely mirrored the Parliamentary elections where candidates from the Ba,ath-dominated NPF formed lists to capture a majority of seats in every constituency. The SARG failed to follow through on earlier promises to abandon the closed list system which is traditionally used to ensure an NPF ruling super-majority (ref A).

¶8. (SBU) The procedures at polling places closely mirrored Parliamentary elections where voters were approached by a number of candidate representatives distributing preprinted lists of government-sanctioned NPF and &independent8 candidates. The independent candidates tended to work with rather than against the SARG by choosing to add their own names underneath pre-ordained, NPF-dominated lists (ref B). (Note. According to diplomatic contacts, the NPF usually accounted for 70 percent of the candidates on the preprinted lists. End Note.) The preprinted list often serves as the

ballot cast by individual voters. Legally, voters have the option to fill a blank ballot but, according to Embassy contacts, voter intimidation, vote rigging and general misunderstanding of election rules amongst Syrian voters leads to few hand-filled ballots cast and even fewer counted.

Although the regime has announced which candidates won, there have been no official figures on the number of votes the winners received as of September 4) eight days after the close of polls. Not surprisingly, almost all of the winners were backed by the regime.

19. (C) Comment. A group of European, U.S., and Canadian diplomats, which met several times during the year to discuss both the Parliamentary elections and the Presidential referendum, came to a consensus view that the 2007 local elections were characterized by heavy regime control and widespread apathy. As such, the process followed much the same pattern as Parliamentary elections and the Presidential referendum where the regime attempted to pursue two divergent goals: present an image of democratic reform while and the same time send the message that there is no alternative to the regime.

CORBIN